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ABSTRACT

The majority of educational systemic change efforts are driven by the experts in the field, leaving the general public disenfranchised. An analysis of stories of those excluded from educational innovation is presented. It is suggested that if "stories" shape social reality as much as by what they exclude as what they include, then the stories from stakeholders (i.e. parents, students, and community members) tend to be excluded when it comes to reports on educational systemic change efforts. Yet these people still talk about the public education system and have their own discourse. When these stakeholders are turned away and their stories are excluded, this erasure makes people unable to "see themselves as a speaking subject worthy of voice." Three interviews are explored here in depth: a female, childless taxpayer, a mother of three, and a woman who was forced out of high school because of pregnancy. It is claimed that making public the stories of the complex network of people who contribute to the educational system make it possible to bridge the different existing community discourses. The paper recommends exploring "heretical" research methods that allow the expression of the "voices of difference." (MKA)

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Hearing Voices of Difference: Stories of Erasure and Heretical Research Methods

by

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"We cannot hope to influence any situation without respect for the complex network of people who contribute to our organizations" (Wheatley, 1992, pp. 144, 145). Parents, students, community members along with school employees are part of the complex network contributing to the organization called the education system. These people all have stories about their experiences with the education system. These voices of difference bring divergent perspectives and offer nuggets of wisdom, embedded in their stories. Their stories need to be heard. Through hearing their stories, these people may then become meaningfully engaged in educational systemic change efforts. However, for their stories to be heard, they must be told. For people to want to tell their stories, they must first "see [themselves] as a speaking subject worthy of voice" (hooks, 1994, p. 149).

This is more complex than it may appear on the surface. Much of the wisdom embedded in people's stories is deemed "expendable." By "expendable," I mean it is "knowledge that is not worth salvaging; not critical to the discourse; not sought out or listened to. Intelligence that is ushered out of the system" (Norum, 1997, p. 199). Consider who (generally) makes decisions about educational systemic change: school staff professionals or policy makers (Carr, 1997). Carr's recent (1997) review of the literature on systemic change in education revealed in over half of the articles reviewed, the stakeholder role was defined as limited (vs. none or powerful). This implies that the majority of educational systemic change efforts are driven by the experts in the field, leaving the general public disenfranchised. If stories "shape our social reality as much as by what they exclude as what they include" (McLaren & Tadeu da Silva, 1993, p. 73), it also implies stories from stakeholders tend to be excluded when it comes to reports on educational systemic change efforts. Rarely do we hear from people outside of the school

system—parents, childless taxpayers,[1] the general public. Yet these people talk about the public education system and have their own discourse. They have stories about their experiences with the public education system, stories which serve to influence their current perceptions of the education system. When we turn away from people's words by excluding their stories, "with that erasure [people] are not able to see [themselves] as a speaking subject, worthy of voice" (hooks, 1994, p. 149).

Two Stories of Erasure

The general public does not seem to easily believe their stories about their experiences with the education system are important or worthy of being shared. My dissertation research centered around people's stories of their experiences with the public education system (Norum, 1997). I wanted to know if people saw themselves as being able to influence the education system and what we might learn about educational systemic change through people's stories. As I asked people if they would participate in this research, in almost every case, they commented that this was the first time anyone had ever asked them to contribute (meaningfully) to the discourse on educational systemic change. It was also the first time their words would be taken seriously enough to appear in print. This was reflected in many of their stories. In the following pages, I present two stories[2] from two of the nine people who participated in my dissertation research. I chose these particular

[1] As of 1990, approximately seventy percent of those funding the public education system did not have school-aged children of their own (Bauman, 1996; Friedenberg, 1994).

[2] The words of the storytellers are presented in italic, to clearly distinguish their words from mine.

stories because in them, the storytellers seem to struggle with the question of whether they are "worthy of voice."

Elaine Madison:[3] Who listens to the voice of a childless taxpayer?

Elaine Madison is 45 years old, happily married, multi-talented, and childless. She is a successful horse trainer in-rural Colorado. When I asked her if she would be part of my dissertation research, her response was, *What could I possibly say that would be relevant or valuable?!* You see, Elaine's primary connection to the public education system is that she pays taxes. In fact, she shared, *I pay for lots of things I don't necessarily agree with or use myself. Last bond issue, it wasn't clear how they were going to use the money to "improve" schools so I voted against it.* She has no children of her own; however, she does attend sporting events and concerts to watch her nieces or nephews.

Although she does not have a direct connection to the public school system, Elaine is a stakeholder according to Chrislip and Larson (1994), who describe stakeholders as

> those people who are responsible for problems or issues, those who are affected by them, those whose perspectives or knowledge are needed to develop good solutions or strategies, and those who have the power and resources to block or implement solutions and strategies (p. 65).

By virtue of being a community member with the power to vote, Elaine can help to "block or implement solutions and strategies." Yet, she says, *As a taxpayer, with no children of my own in the system, I feel like my voice doesn't count. After all, because I don't have kids, how could I know what is*

[3]Names used are pseudonyms.

best for other people's children? The only influence that I might be able to have on the system, is to become actively involved in it. I have watched with frustration, how my own siblings have tried to work within the system. Without going down to the school and getting right in someone's face, the educational well-being of one of my nieces was compromised. She was lost in the school's computer, along with 30+ other students, as she entered junior high school. As a result, she was thrown out of the learning track that she had pre-registered for. One of her substitute classes involved learning how to play games. For an entire quarter, this class learned how to play card games, chess, dominoes, etc. This is what I as a taxpayer am paying for?! One of my nephews was astute enough to realize that the spelling list from grade 7 was the exact same list in grade 8.

What does this say about how taxpayer money is being spent? Why can't the education system teach what used to be the basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills effectively? I have a problem voting in more money for schools, when I see today's youth still struggling with the basics of education at the high school level. As an American, taxes are just something that goes with the territory. I vote according to what I feel will be most beneficial for teachers and students.

As someone whose primary connection to the education system is as a taxpayer, Elaine has wisdom to offer the system; wisdom she herself did not recognize until she read and approved the draft of her story which would become a chapter in my dissertation. Those whose primary connection is through paying taxes are rarely invited to participate in a district or school's change efforts. Because their participation is not sought out, it would appear that their perspective is not valued. And because they are not sought out, this

reinforces the perception that the perspective of the childless taxpayer is not valuable: their words are erased.

Leah Halberg: Do Parents Know Anything?

Leah Halberg is a parent of three children, ages 15, 12, and 8. She and her family reside in a suburb of the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Leah has had many opportunities to interact with the schools and the professionals who educate her children. School professionals often consider themselves to be experts in child development. Leah had an experience which lead her to question whether as a parent, she could or should consider herself as an "expert" in child development. She shared the following story:

Last year, Brent [the 15 year old] enrolled in an elective called "Power and Energy." Based on the description in the handbook, Brent thought he would be able to study electric energies and learn about radio-controlled vehicles. He knew that the study of small gas engines would be part of the course, which was not of interest to him.

It took only one week for Brent to be frustrated with the class. Although according to the description, several energies would be studied, the teacher, Mr. Rievers, had only focused on the gas engine and hadn't mentioned anything else as he described the curriculum for the rest of the quarter. He divided the kids up into groups and each group had a motor to take apart. Brent was not at all interested in this part; he was just waiting for this section of the class to be over and the teaching of the other energies to begin.

By mid-quarter, it was obvious Brent wasn't doing well; he simply was not interested in this motor. Mr. Kievers announced that they would continue with this activity until the end of the quarter. Brent wanted to drop the class. His grade wasn't that great anyway and I told him to go ahead and drop it. He didn't need it; it was just an elective. It was the end of the school year and he hadn't had a study hall yet in junior high. And that was about the only elective he could change to where he wouldn't have been affected by missing the first half of the class. So I told him to go ahead and check out how to change classes.

Brent spoke with the teacher and was told he couldn't drop the class so late in the quarter. Brent spoke with the counselor and was told he couldn't drop the class. I decided to take it further. The next morning, Brent and I paid a visit to the counselor's office, unannounced. I explained I was supporting Brent in trying to drop this class. The counselor suggested that Brent wanted to drop the class simply because he would not get a good grade and that I was supporting this move because my pride would be hurt by Brent getting a lower grade than usual! I explained that the grade was not the issue; the issue was that this was an ***elective*** *class and Brent did not need the credits—in fact, it was a waste of his time, which could be better spent in a study hall. The counselor reluctantly gave me a form to fill out and explained that the principal, Dr. Garfeld would call me later with his decision. I went home and Brent resumed his class schedule for the day.*

After lunch, the principal called, explaining that it was too late to change classes. Brent would have to stay in the class. I questioned his reasoning. Dr. Garfeld questioned what values I am teaching my child that I would push him to quit when the going got tough. I tried to calmly explain that it wasn't because the going got tough; it was because the description of

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the class was misleading and had Brent known this class was going to be all and only about gas motors, he wouldn't have signed up for it in the first place. I asked Dr. Garfeld to look at Brent's record throughout junior high: he was an A/B student and definitely not a problem. I recapped what I had verbally told the counselor and what was written in the request. Dr. Garfeld still did not see a reason to approve the change. I informed him I would be in to see him later in the afternoon.

In the mean time, I started to have second thoughts. After all, I don't have a degree in child development. What if this does ruin the rest of Brent's life? What if I am sending the wrong message? So, I called my friend Maureen for some affirmation. She reassured me that dropping an elective on engines was not going to ruin Brent's life and reminded me that even though I didn't have a degree in this stuff, I had raised Brent for 15 years now and that's worth something!

To make a long story short, later that afternoon, I went to see Dr. Garfeld. I again went over my reasons for requesting a change in Brent's class; Dr. Garfeld again denied the request. I asked if he would at least try discussing it with Mr. Rievers and get the teacher's point of view as to why this class would be so very important in my son's life. Dr. Garfeld said I should meet with the teacher, explain the situation, and then we could discuss it. I amenably went to speak with Mr. Rievers. Mr. Rievers ended up concluding, "It ain't no skin off my back [if Brent drops the class]." I concluded Mr. Rievers didn't even know which student Brent was. Dr. Garfeld still did not want to approve the request. But, in the end, persistance paid off and he caved.

I had spent the better part of my day on this. All in all, I was at school for over three hours and spent another half hour on the phone to the

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principal. I could have been doing something a little more productive. The principal also spent a significant amount of time on this issue. I think his time would have been better spent on a child that needed his attention, who maybe doesn't have parental involvement. There are bigger decisions for a principal to make; bigger problems in a junior high to solve.

As she shared this story, it was clear to me Leah's words were effectively erased by the experts: what could she know about child development and what was best for a 15-year-old? The wisdom she offered the school counselor and principal about her own child was deemed expendable. Leah bought into this enough to question her judgment—her friend Maureen needed to remind her that as a parent, she **did** know something about child development, especially when it came to her own children! One of the buried treasures in Leah's story is the illustration of how the interrelationships between "experts" is perceived: school professionals think of themselves as child development experts and many times exclude the wisdom of parents regarding decisions about their own children. Parents do not typically think of themselves as "child development experts" and may often go along with the "expert's" advice. Parents are not the "professionals" and therefore may question whether they know what is best for their children, reinforcing the status of the school professional as "expert."

Heretical Research Methods

Hearing voices of difference is a challenge. Each of the nine participants in my dissertation study had a connection to the education system merely by having attended a public school. Each had experiences

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related to their time in public school. Some still have direct connections to the public school system through being employed by it or by being parents of school-aged children. Others seemed to sense a vague, distant connection through the experiences of other family members. Yet there was a general sense that no one felt they were in a position to meaningfully influence the education system. Their stories were not important enough.

Each of the people in my study knew that their story was one of nine being told. Individually, they would ask me if what they were sharing was unique—perhaps they were the only one who felt this way? Their stories and that question indicated to me a sense of disconnectedness from the discourse—the discourse on educational systemic change and disconnectedness from their own community discourse. For example, parents of school-aged children share a discourse about public education that is different from the discourse childless taxpayers share (P. Jenlink, personal communication, February 14, 1997). This sense of disconnectedness is cause for concern:

> "But wait," someone cautioned—"Where is Wolf's brother? Who then speaks for Wolf?" But the people were decided and their mind was firm (Underwood, 1991, p. 26).

If these people are not being invited to tell their stories and their words are not being heard, who is speaking for them?

As researchers, we may be in a position to unveil rather than erase people's words. Method can be used to give voice and even encourage heresy: the deliberate attempt to bring divergent points of view on issues to the forefront (Levin & Riffel, 1997). As researchers, we have the opportunity to bring people's stories and their divergent points of view to a public audience.

Nonfictional Educational Stories

For my dissertation, I chose to write a nonfictional educational story (Barone, 1992). Nonfictional educational stories are typically found in popular literature and are composed in the style and format of literary journalism (Barone, 1992). They focus on human experience and "bring theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). Barone (1992) describes three dimensions of nonfictional educational stories:

> 1) *Accessibility*. This means that the language used is understandable.
>
> 2) *Compellingness*. This refers to using the story format which means there is a beginning (perhaps the recognition of a dilemma), a middle (movement towards the resolution of the dilemma), and an end (some kind of a closure or coming to a rest).
>
> 3) *Moral persuasiveness*. This has to do with the content of the story, which should challenge readers to rethink their notions and enable them to "gaze in fresh astonishment upon a part of their world they thought they had already seen" (p. 20).

Nonfictional educational stories and narrative inquiry in general lend themselves to hearing voices of difference as well as provide a form for presenting research to a public audience. In fact, this particular form of qualitative research lends itself well to heresy. It creates a space for and values personal voice and the sharing of personal perspectives (Greene, 1995; Munro, 1993). In this type of research, people's stories are brought to the forefront and become the data. The uniqueness of divergent voices and the practical wisdom embedded in those voices is celebrated. The door is opened for a polyphony of voices to be heard. The form paints a different kind of picture, allowing for different and possibly new kinds of understandings (Barone & Eisner, 1997). It has been suggested that the problems with

educational systemic change are fundamentally problems of the way we think; the assumptions we hold about education and thus, need to be addressed through challenging our assumptions and changing our thinking (Levin & Riffel, 1997). Through narrative inquiry, we learn of people's stories, experiences, and perceptions, laying the foundation for new understandings and learning to take place. There also is promise for bringing our research to a wider public audience, thus potentially impacting educational practices, policies, public support, and systems (Zeller, 1995).

Telling stories is a very human thing to do and we all have stories. "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). In fact, telling our stories might be the most human thing we do. By telling stories, we remember our past, invent our present, revision our future, discover compassion and create community with kindred souls (Keen & Valley-Fox, 1973).

When people are given the space to voice their perspectives along with a method to make their stories public, others can respond. Merz and Furman (1997) tell us

> schools may be one of the few social institutions left that bridge the gap between the individual or family and the larger civic society. Citizens need to voice their values and preferences as a means of shaping society (p. 97).

A narrative approach to research allows people to voice their values and preferences, increasing our collective knowledge of the human experience (Bakan, 1996). In the process of sharing perspectives through sharing stories, people learn more about their own perspective and are able re-evaluate its viability (Dixon, 1996).

Giroux (1988) tells us "voice" can be a description of the relationship between knowledge and experience and a forum for examining broader issues. People are the authorities of their own life stories (Etter-Lewis, 1996) and thus are the authorities of their perceptions. I present one last voice which illustrates a relationship between knowledge and experience. This voice also encourages heresy for it brings a divergent view to an experience, providing a forum for examining broader issues.

Gillian Sherwood: The Gift of Heretical Questions

I got pregnant with my first daughter when I was at Hensen High and they kicked me out. They said that it was encouraging other teenagers that it was OK to get pregnant at a young age. There was like a school for pregnant teenagers and I wasn't able to get in there because they had like a year, year and a half waiting list. So it was like by the time I would have gotten in there, it was time for me to graduate, so it was just really bad. "Oh well, guess I can't go back to school!" That took care of that! Gillian was in her sophomore year when she dropped out of high school.

September 1996, 18-year-old Gillian Sherwood was living at a shelter for the homeless in Denver, CO. She was married to a 17-year-old high school drop out and now had two daughters. Her 17-year-old brother Tristan was also part of this "family."[4] Tristan also was a high school drop out. I met Tristan before I met Gillian. As I inquired about why they had dropped out of school, Tristan said about Gillian, *My sister basically dropped out because she*

[4]From 1990 to 1995, the Denver metro area saw a 180 percent increase in the number of homeless children under the age of 17 (James, 1996).

had a baby. They wouldn't let her into high school 'coz she was pregnant. [Anyway] that's what she told me, is that they wouldn't let her go to school 'coz she was you know, she was like 8 1/2 months pregnant and they didn't want her in school when she was that far along or something. Because they were maybe afraid that she'd have the baby in class? I don't know—that's what she told me.

Consider the implications of this story. Gillian's interpretation of her experience is that she was forced to leave school because she was pregnant. Perhaps she was caught in a situation similar to that described by LouAnne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*: Pregnant Shamica (Johnson's student) was discouraged from attending her regular school and enocuraged to enroll in the "School-Aged Mothers Program." As the administrator explained to Johnson, "There are a number of disadvantages to having pregnant girls in the classroom...it distracts the other students and [sends the message that it's OK]" (Johnson, 1992, p. 246). Whatever Gillian's situation, her perception that she was forced out of school becomes part of her life story—the story she tells her brother and me is one of disenfranchisement. This story, along with Gillian and Tristan's shared story of astounding parental abuse,[5] (see Norum, 1997) defines her situation or the reality in which she now lives (LeCompte, 1995).

Gillian's voice is a description of her experience ("they" made me drop out of school) and her resulting knowledge. When asked what she would do if one of her daughters one day came home reporting the same kind of negative school experiences she herself had, Gillian answered, *I'd automatically take her out and put her in a different school.* And if that

[5]It is common for homeless youth to cite parental neglect and/or abuse (abuse meaning the parent(s) abused them or the parent(s) abused drugs, alcohol or both) as reasons for leaving their home situation (The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 1993; James, 1995).

didn't work? *I'd find another school.* And if that didn't work? *Maybe I'd just teach them at home.* She laughed at the suggestion to talk with the school staff about the (hypothetical) problems her daughter was having and finding a better way to meet her needs. From Gillian's perspective, *The schools are overpowered by the School Board. Everything is their way. Oh no, I know if I was to walk into a school asking what was going on and say "I don't like it," they'd say "Take your kid out of school then!"*

For me, Gillian's story provided a gift. Her divergent voice provides an opportunity for examining broader issues. I suspect Hensen High did not "kick" Gillian out because she was pregnant. Most likely there was a policy (for her own good) that was enforced. But what if instead of focusing on her misinterpretation of that event, I valued her perception of what happened to her? What if I considered her explanation at face value? Perhaps then a space for heretical questions is created; broad questions about what we as a society could be thinking!

What is going on when a pregnant 16-year-old is forced out of school (at least that is her perception)? What is going on when a 17-year-old drops out of school because the school cannot seem to eliminate the presence of gangs, drugs, and violence? What is going on when middle and high school aged youth are dropping out of school because they find it boring? What is going on when young parents feel they have no influence over the school their children attend and their only recourse is to keep searching for a better school? What is going on when as a society, we close our eyes and walk away while homeless youth drop into a black hole?[6] And what are the

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[6]In many places, there is no coordinated service system for homeless youth on their own (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 1993; Youth on the Edge, 1994).

consequences of not authentically engaging this wisdom in conversations about school change?

Hearing Voices of Difference

Disenfranchisement is having no voice and no one who **has** to listen to you when you do speak (Kahn, 1991). Giroux (1988) tells us language is linked to struggles over what gets defined as meaningful. Bringing voices of difference to the forefront is critical to the current existing discourse related to educational systemic change. Not only do divergent voices with divergent connections to the educational system provide divergent views, this divergence informs ethical decision-making (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). Divergence also broadens the conversation related to educational systemic change, taking it beyond the often cited economic rationale for change (Levin & Riffel, 1997).

Making public the stories of the complex network of people who contribute to the organization we call the education system makes it possible to bridge the different existing community discourses. For example, if Elaine Madison sees that other childless taxpayers have stories too, she can become connected to her community discourse. Then if childless taxpayers hear stories such as Leah Halberg's, common concerns across the community discourses can begin to be identified, further connecting these communities of discourse. In addition, people begin to see that they are "speaking subjects, worthy of voice" (hooks, 1994, p. 149). Heretical questions, those that demand divergent points of view to be expressed and discussed, can then be asked.

As researchers, we have the opportunity to make research public. Personal experience methods of research particularly have the power to make connections beyond the traditional academic research community to the fundamental human experiences of life (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). The nonfictional educational story allows research to serve the community and open up conversations with a public audience (Barone, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Richardson, 1994). The method also has the power to make heard a polyphony of voices; voices of difference that need to be heard in the current conversation about educational systemic change. Our challenge is to continue to explore heretical research methods that will allow us to unveil rather than erase voices of difference.

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